

Ezekiel 34:15-16, 20-24  
Matthew 14:1-21

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Devon, Pennsylvania  
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## Whom to Follow

Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter."  
The king was grieved, yet out of regard for his oaths and the guests, he commanded it to be given. *Matthew 14:8-9*  
When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and he cured their sick. *Matthew 14:14*

One of the neat things about traveling by train is that periodically you can get up and while the train is moving go for a substantial walk. Your fellow travelers are linked to you and each other by common themes. Many share a common destination, or perhaps business or family plans, backgrounds, hopes and needs, and so on.

Each of the gospels is not unlike such a procession of linked rail cars among whose passengers we are invited to share a journey. We have noted before how the gospel narratives are stitched together with thematic threads, like the couplings on railroad carriages linking human stories in one section to those in adjacent cars. Put another way, every passage of Scripture is interpreted by the one next to it. These pairs work in two ways: either the two narratives agree and so reinforce each other, or they oppose each other by contrast. The latter is the situation in today's gospel reading: the story of the hideously self-centered life-taking of John the Baptist by an evil king, contrasted with the wholly compassionate life-giving King Jesus who teaches and feeds the multitude.

In setting these polar opposite stories together, Matthew requires us to make a choice. Either we follow Herod or we follow Jesus.

Each narrative starts with a REPORT. King Herod, who's paranoid about political unrest, gets a report that crowds are flocking to hear Jesus, and Herod fears that he's John the Baptist come back to life (Herod had earlier arrested and subsequently had John killed, *Matt. 4:12*). In a retrospective, Matthew takes us back to the moment when Jesus learns that John is dead. Knowing that the same fate awaits him, and unable to steel himself for that terrible hour because the needy crowds press upon him and his disciples relentlessly—as Mark put it “for many were coming and going and they had no leisure even to eat” (*Mark 6:31*) Jesus retreats across the lake in a boat with his disciples, hoping for some quiet. But the mass of humanity follows around the lake. So Jesus, pushing aside his own needs, has compassion on them and heals their sick.

Now we have two contrasting FEASTS. Herod, throwing a birthday bash in the palace for all his cronies, lavishes food on those who are not without food. This ostentation is merely a symbol of his power. Jesus also initiates a feast in the wilderness for the poor and hungry, because he has compassion on them. Unlike Herod, who breaks in two the body of God's servant, John, Jesus breaks the bread (which is his body) in an arresting image of what Herod and his cohort will do to Jesus, breaking his body at his crucifixion.

Then—two COMMANDS. Herod commands that his step-daughter’s request for the head of John the Baptist be honored, and that the *remains* (John’s severed head) be brought in to her on a serving platter. Jesus, by contrast, commands all the people to sit down on the grass, and feeds them from a meager store of five loaves and two fish. As a sign of the limitless riches of God, there is enough and more for this vast multitude, even to overflowing, these *remains* amounting to twelve baskets-full. Numbers are never casually used in the Bible, but invariably speak of something still more profound. The five loaves stand for the five “Books of Moses” the Torah (Gen-Deut), which have been the nourishment of generations. And they also symbolize, as Stanley Hauerwas notes, that unlike Herod’s food, Jesus’ body will never be exhausted. The two fish stand for the second and third branches of Old Testament Scripture, the law and the prophets. The twelve baskets, for God’s bountiful provision for the twelve tribes of Israel, here gathered by their new representatives, the twelve apostles.

Whom to follow. In his brilliant commentary on Mark’s Gospel, *Binding the Strong Man*, Ched Myers observes, “The dilemma created by [Herod’s] oath is a parody on the shameless methods of decision-making among the elite, a world in which human life is bartered to save royal face: Herod trades the “head” (symbolizing his honor [in that culture]) of the prophet to rescue the integrity of his own drunken oath.” Herod would rather hold to a rash promise made with hideous consequences, than do the right thing.

If such actions ring somehow familiar, and we have gone along with them, then we to have followed Herod. Whenever deep injustices have been perpetrated by those in corporate or civic or judicial or family or political life, by persons whom we felt were out of reach, and we felt outrage but did nothing, then we too abdicated our responsibility to Christ and followed Herod.

There is a terrible burden that comes upon us in a land that gives us so much, for the more we have the more disposed we become to the protection of our own interests at the expense of acting justly. Choosing rightly has costly consequences, as the heart is fearfully aware. Which is precisely why Matthew places these twin stories of moral culpability and grace here.

It takes little if any courage to follow Herod, the *status quo*. Courage is not as natural an inclination as self protection and self interest. The courageous act may indeed have noble intentions. In the *Iliad*, Hector knowing that he must face the rage of the indomitable Achilles, reflects, “Now do I behold that my fate has come near unto me.” Then he asks himself how a brave man should die, and after some thought he answers his own question: “He should so die that no one who knows of the manner of his death will be weakened by it.”

Noble indeed. But this is not enough. If even a heroic death is not inspired by heaven’s cause—for Jesus’ sake—such a death begs the question: can it have abiding value? Let me offer an example of perfected courage, quoted at length in William James’ now classic volume, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. It’s an account by an English missionary, John G. Paton, of Melanesian cannibals in the late 1800s.

“One of our chiefs, full of the Christ-kindled desire to seek and to save, sent a message to an inland chief, that he and four attendants would come on Sabbath and tell them the gospel of Jehovah God. The reply came back sternly forbidding their visit, and threatening with death any Christian that approached their village. Our chief sent in response a loving message, telling them that Jehovah had taught the Christians to return good for evil, and that they would come unarmed to tell them the story of how the Son of God came into the world and died in order to bless and save his enemies. The heathen chief sent back a stern and prompt reply once

more: 'If you come, you will be killed.' On Sabbath morn the Christian chief and his four companions were met outside the village by the heathen chief, who implored and threatened them once more. But the former said:—

'We come to you without weapons of war! We come only to tell you about Jesus. We believe that He will protect us today.'

As they pressed steadily forward towards the village, spears began to be thrown at them. Some they evaded, being all except one dexterous warriors; and others they literally received with their bare hands, and turned them aside in an incredible manner. The heathen, apparently thunder-struck at these men thus approaching them without weapons of war, and not even flinging back their own spears which they had caught, after having thrown what the old chief called 'a shower of spears,' desisted from mere surprise. Our Christian chief called out, as he and his companions drew up in the midst of them on the village public ground: —

'Jehovah thus protects us. He has given us all your spears! Once we would have thrown them back at you and killed you. But now we come, not to fight but to tell you about Jesus. He has changed our hearts. He asks you now to lay down all these your other weapons of war, and to hear what we can tell you about the love of God, our great Father, the only living God.'

The heathens were perfectly overawed. They manifestly looked on these Christians as protected by some Invisible One. They listened for the first time to the story of the Gospel and of the Cross. We lived to see that chief and all his tribe sitting in the school of Christ. And there is perhaps not an island in these southern seas, amongst all those won for Christ, where similar acts of heroism on the part of converts cannot be recited. Amen.